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Overseas special Home & Living

To be sure of snow, try the high life

While one resort looks like a Christmas card, another can be green slopes. **Zoe Dare Hall** discovers where to buy to make the most of your skiing time

Western Europe was so snowless last winter that many of those who went in search of white slopes over Christmas and the New Year found themselves green hill-walking instead.

Austrian resorts such as St Anton were among the worst hit by unseasonal warmth. St Moritz in Switzerland and Val d'Isere and Megève in France also suffered. In fact, for anywhere below 2,000 metres (6,000ft), the season was brief.

To avoid the same disappointment this year, keen skiers face only high altitude resorts - 1,500m and above - in mind. But if you are searching for a European snow home, should you adopt the same strategy?

Opinion is divided. "Alpine resorts above 1,500m will become more sought-after in coming years," says **Jeremy Hollison**,

director of Savills Alpine Homes. "For consistent ski-in, ski-out in Europe, you need to be stationed over 2,000m, but this is unrealistic in the vast majority of resorts which are below this altitude. Also, you don't get trees above about 1,600m, which can make the resorts less attractive."

Bonny Garner from the Ski Club of Great Britain advises that if you want to play safe, "go to a resort that has a glacier. Then you are guaranteed good skiing from



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property specialist **Erna Low points** out, your property need not be high-altitude, as long as you have easy access to higher slopes. "Everyone is quick to dismiss low-altitude resorts, but you shouldn't

despite sitting at just 1,100m, with peaks rising to 2,487m, saw skiers being bussed over from snowless Chamonix and Megève last winter. "We're in the shadow of Mont Blanc so we have a very reliable



rafting and canyoning to golf and beach volleyball. The edelweiss residences bring something new to ski architecture too. They are designed by architect Matteo Thun as vertical terraces with terraces

and La Plagne." But as Bertie Sanderson from ski

Contamines, a French Alpine village one hour from Geneva that



of all the high-altitude resorts making up the La Plagne area, this is the most popular. Fifty-two traditional apartments at Le Centaure, a converted 1930s building in Belle Plagne, at 2,050m. From £39,000 through Alpine House (www.alpinesales.com)



With 69 lifts to slopes ranging from 1,500m to 3,300m across the Four Valleys, there is plenty here for skiers. Residence Elzebeth is 500m from the ski lifts and there are properties ranging from studios at £273,000 to three-bed apartments at £353,000. Chesterton International (as above)



Resorts in Austria don't come more snow-sure than Kitzbühel. Its residences are assigned to look like world-famous chalets, with trendy interiors and balconies overlooking the mountains. Prices from £196,000. Erna Low (www.ernalow.com)

Chovetaz in Les Contamines, bought three years ago through Chesterton International for £59,000. The trouble with high altitude resorts is that they're dead out of season," Fiona adds. "Les Contamines is lively all year and faces north-east so it's sunny but it holds the snow. You could ski right down to the car park until the end of March this year." So if you want to be sure of snow, where should you go?

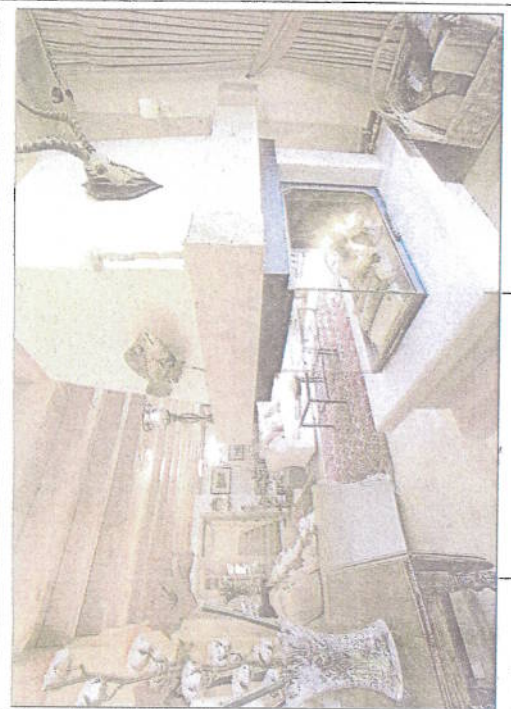
FRANCE
La Plagne, Semnoz. The best of France's higher resorts are Belle Plagne, La Plagne, Val D'Isère and Courchevel 1850. Of the 10 villages and high-altitude resorts making up the La Plagne area, Belle Plagne, at 2,050m, is the most popular. It is a car-free, ski-in, ski-out resort with numerous bars, restaurants and shops and 130 miles of snow-sure pistes.

With access to three peaks, it's where house-hunting ski fanatics are looking. Alpine Homes (www.alpinesales.com) is selling 52 traditional apartments at Le Centaure, a converted 1930s building in Belle Plagne, from £99,000 with 3/25 net cash guaranteed rent on a leaseback basis for nine years (0207 5901024 www.ernalow.com) has one- and two-bedroom apartments at Chalet Hotel Montalys, with a swimming pool and spa on site, from £170,000, fully-furnished and with guaranteed returns (also through a leaseback scheme) of up to 3/5 per cent.

St Martin-de-Belleville, Savoie: For a mid-altitude, year-round resort option with easy access via the Three Valleys Express to Belleville, at 1,450m, lies at the foot of the Three Valleys, with lifts to a vast skiing area that includes Meribel and Courchevel and skiting up to 3,200m. In the traditional village, which has a Michelin-starred restaurant, Erna Low is selling rustic four- to six-bedroom chalets at La Duché, with views across the valley, from £1.24 million, or two-bedroom apartments in Les Chalets de Saint Girard from £370,000, two hours from Lyon.

SWITZERLAND
Valais canton: With 69 lifts to take you to slopes ranging from 1,305m to 3,330m across the Four Valleys, Nendaz - an hour and 50 minutes from Geneva - offers skiers plenty of scope. At Residence Glanzbad, 500m from ski lifts, Chesterton International is selling properties ranging from studios at £913,000 to three-bed apartments for £563,000 (0207 7201 2070, www.chestertoninternational.com)

Also on the doorstep of the Four Valleys, there are six traditional wooden apartments at Les Chalets



de Marie in Ovroumaz, available through Chesterton International, from £162,000-£211,000, at an altitude of 1,350m. If your budget is as high as your taste for skiing, the five-bedroom Chalet Pstard in Verbier will get you back £9.42 million through Knight Frank (0207 629 8371, www.knightfrank.com), with nearly 100 lifts reaching 3,300m and Europe's best off-piste skiing on your doorstep.

Among Switzerland's highest mountains near the Italian border, the car-free town of Saas-Fee sits at 1,500m with pistes up to 3,550m and a glacier that allows summer skiing. It's as close to year-round snow and rental potential as any ski property could have. Swiss Property Sales have apartments at the Residence Palace (oc in Saas-Fee from £317,000 and chalets from £505,000 (011 4 233 1665, www.swissproperty.co.uk)

Visual contrast: Vilnius-Sur-Ollon is the high-altitude resort of choice for Philip Barker of Overseas Housecraft. "It's a charming, busy resort that is easy to get to, yet it offers extensive skiing over 3,000m, ensuring your winter holiday won't be a disappointment," he says. Overseas Housecraft is

Designed as vertical fir cones with contemporary interiors

before blood warming was talked about, Obercauern provided The Beatles with white slopes while filming their movie *Help!*, after snow at other resorts had melted. Now it is gaining a reputation as one of the best high altitude resorts in Austria, with one of the longest seasons in Europe, running from November to May. Most skiing is above the tree line, with wide open pistes ideal for all levels. The Zshentner Mountain Resort, 60 miles from Salzburg, is the newest addition, with 36 apartments ranging from one-bedroom at £137,000 to three-bedroom penthouses for £380,000, next to the main gondola, available through Savills International (0207 016 3740, www.alpinesales.com or www.savills.co.uk/abroad).

THE ONES TO WATCH
Zandjakh, Montenegro: Set at 1,456m on the highest mountain in the Balkans, Zandjakh is beautiful, largely undeveloped and offers a more speculative ski investment with good growth potential. The infrastructure is basic but being updated, with new lifts and a road being built from the coast to the mountains, cutting drive time by half to around an hour. Montenegro Realty (07852 432152, www.montenegrorealty.com) is selling one of the first off-plan developments, with two-bedroom apartments from £68,000 and three-bedroom houses from £172,000. "It's a popular resort with people from neighbouring Balkan countries and also from Austria, Germany and Switzerland," says Scott McCarthy from Montenegro Realty. "It's early days in Zandjakh but it's up and coming with a lot of potential."

Multi-millionaire, Marwan: Investing in snow in Africa might sound like madness, but 3,250m up in the Atlas Mountains, property developers - among them huge Dubai-based developer Emaar - plan to turn Oukaimeden, Africa's first ski resort, into a major snow-glitzy apres-ski at present, but in a few years Oukaimeden will be home to 2,000 hotel rooms, shops, restaurants and indoor-ski slopes for year-round activity. Travel insurer Churchill's SnowFuture report predicts that climate change will make Morocco a top alpine destination by 2050. Arnie Wilson, editor of *Ski and Snow*, isn't so sure. "It's very undeveloped with a few lifts that are hard to get to and the crucial thing will be its snow-making capacity, so they'll need to inject a lot of money into the resort." About 50 minutes from the slopes and 20 minutes from central Marrakech, is Douzane (the style vilas from £225,000 through Calliers CIL, www.calliers.com, 0207 934 7499).

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